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The Making of a Gladiator

Decide what kind of man you want to be, and be him.

HANDBOOK OF EPICTETUS THE STOIC 33

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The tiro faces two life-changing choices, which will literally define his identity for the remaining years of service. From the very beginning it will have been made plain that, while ancient, his profession is not an honourable one. Therefore he should follow the example of the even older and equally dishonourable profession of the prostitutes (who do a roaring trade outside the amphitheatre when the gladiators have finished their bouts), and do his dirty work under the cover of an assumed nom de guerre.

This hankering for anonymity is also one reason why some gladiatorial helmets do as good a job of protecting the gladiator's identity as they do of protecting his skull. Nemo the *secutor* can appear in the arena with even his nearest and dearest watching from the stands unaware of his original identity as Marcus Ovis Nero Familiae.*

Spectators sometimes accuse a poorly performing gladiator of being a runaway slave, since slaves are notoriously lacking in moral fibre. An indiscriminating *ludus* does indeed make a secure hideout for those prepared to leap from the frying pan of slavery to the fire of the arena, since, even during his public performances, the identity of the runaway is protected.

Therefore, for a variety of reasons, gladiators assume a variety of names – or have names chosen for them. A gladiator is essentially in show business, and the *lanista* might fancy his marketing skills. Gladiatorial anonymity means that we have no idea who the most famous gladiator in history actually was, since Spartacus adopted the name of a town in Thracia.

* The black sheep of the family.

Heroic, ironic, bombastic or iconic?

Names can come from many sources. Mythology offers a rich vein, if one fancies fighting as a Hector or an Ajax (and though calling oneself after the famously invulnerable Achilles might be tempting fate, some gladiators are prepared to take the risk). One gladiator in the past called himself Hermes, the god who leads souls to the underworld. His divine namesake must have approved, for Hermes was indeed highly successful. The poet Martial cannot repeat his name often enough.

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*Hermes, favourite fighter of the day...Hermes, skilled with every weapon,
Hermes, both gladiator and doctor, Hermes the Hurricane, terror of
his ludus, Hermes, who frightens Heliuss (and is the only man who can),
Hermes, who knocks down Advolans (and is the only man who
can)...Hermes, the ticket scalper's gold-mine, Hermes, the darling and
heart-breaker of his female groupies, Hermes, proud with martial
spear, Hermes, threatening with the trident, Hermes, fearsome with trailing
helmet, Hermes, the glory of all kinds of war, Hermes, everything in
himself, and three times unique.*

MARTIAL EPIGRAMS 5.24

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Other suggestions include:

Felix 'Happy' or 'fortunate'
Hilarus 'The cheerful'
Narcissus Another mythological
character
Nikephorus 'Bearer of victory'
(Greek)
Victor For straightforward
Latin types
Maximus 'The greatest' – for
those who feel Victor is too subtle

Asiaticus For someone from
Asia Minor
Sabinus From the Sabine country
of Italy
Flamma 'The flame'
Cygnus 'The swan'
Mansuetus 'The polite', for those
with a sense of irony
Florus 'Blossom' (ditto)

Those really keen on anonymity choose generic, everyday names, so common that they are highly forgettable, such as:

Valerius
Sergius
Valens
Servius
Servilius

Those bearing a single name are often slaves, so some *auctorati*, even if they forswear their real names, might still use a two-part name such as Lucius Pompeius or Marcus Rutilius. Some even advertise that they are Roman citizens, as did Marcus Quintus Ducenius, who proudly uses his distinctive three-part Roman name, the *tria nomina*, on the same tombstone that boasts of his arena victories.

Those with but a single name will find the lack compensated for by the use of their chosen speciality, with the name of the *familia gladiatoria* completing the identification. So a graffito praising *Hilarus Ner. XI v) XIII* clearly identifies Hilarus of the Neronian family, who has won nine times in the thirteen combats he has survived.

M. Attilius the beginner takes on the experienced Hilarus. Probably to his own surprise, Attilius emerges as the victor. (This is shown by the 'V' which finishes the line.)



Choosing a speciality

Some gladiator types, such as the Gaul or Samnite, are now out of fashion, but plenty of choices remain. As well as choosing the name, the *magister* and *lanista* must decide on the role for which their tiro is best suited. They may even consult the individual whose future depends on their choice, but don't bet on it.



Statuettes of provocator-style gladiators. With everything aligned for combat, helmet, shield and greaves present a solidly armoured front to an opponent.

Heavies

A physically powerful type with (relatively) limited agility will probably end up in the heavy squad. This is a generic name for several types of gladiator, properly called the *scutarii*, or 'shield carriers'. These are gladiators who fight with a sword, large shield and a considerable amount of armour, including that anonymizing helmet. Soldiers and ex-soldiers take a particular interest in these types, as their kit is the closest to actual legionary equipment. Since legionaries are encouraged to watch gladiator fights to get them used to bloodletting, soldiers will be a discerning part of a heavy's audience, especially in provincial amphitheatres. Types of 'heavy' include:

Provocator 'The challenger'

Weapon – a short sword (sometimes a short, short sword).

Shield – large, rectangular. A superior version of legionary issue.

Helmet – all-encompassing, with grille-covered eyeholes for visibility.

Armour – *manica* (protective sleeve), greave (protecting the forward leg) and *cardiophylax* (chest protector).

Usual opponent – another provocator.



Anyone who uses a shield purely for defence is missing half the weapon's potential. In this mosaic from Germania, a gladiator demonstrates this powerfully.

Murmillo 'The fish man'

Weapon – short sword.

Shield – large, wooden, partly oval or rectangular.

Helmet – full face, with the distinctive crest that might look like a 'fish-fin' from some angles.

Armour – padded or armoured guard on the sword arm, protective greave.

Usual opponent – Thracian, though smaller arenas might also match a *murmillo* with a *provocator* or *retiarius* (though the *murmillo*'s helmet is so vulnerable to a good net cast that the latter is not really a fair fight).

**Secutor** 'The chaser'

Weapon – short sword and a dagger as back-up.

Shield – large, wooden, rectangular.

Helmet – full face, smooth and egg-shaped, with few projections a net can catch on.

Armour – padded or armoured guard on the sword arm, protective greave.

Usual opponent – *retiarius*. In fact, chasing the nimble *retiarius* gives the *secutor* his name.

**Small-shield fighters (parmularii)**

Sometimes it pays to be agile. A lightly armoured fighter can skip around his more cumbersome opponent looking for an opening. Also, while the heavies are limited to a sword, and sometimes a rather limited sword at that, the lighter fighters are equipped with a variety of items to ruin an opponent's day. Types of *parmularii* include:



FROM TOP TO BOTTOM A murmillo takes a bow after his combat; a secutor prepares to finish off a retiarius; and two parmularii adopt fighting poses as they measure up the opposition.

Hoplomachus 'The hoplite fighter'

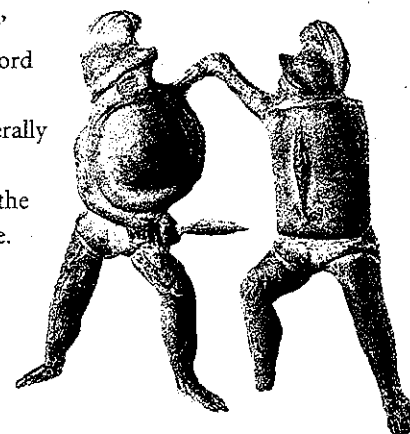
Weapon – thrusting spear, short sword and dagger.

Shield – round, small, curved. Generally made of metal, such as bronze.

Helmet – Grecian style, as a nod to the original hoplite opponents of Rome.

Armour – padded or armoured guard on the sword arm and thigh, protective greave.

Usual opponent – *murmillo* or Thracian.

**Thracian**

Weapon – curved Thracian dagger, about a foot long.

Shield – small, curved and rectangular.

Helmet – distinctive, wide-brimmed, often with a griffin. (Griffins were the companions of Nemesis, goddess of impending doom.)

Armour – padded arm and thigh guards and greave.

Usual opponent – *murmillo* or *hoplomachus*.

Retiarius 'The net-man'

Weapon – a trident and a net, dagger as back-up.

Shield – the *galerus*, armour fitted to the shoulder as part of the arm-guard. One part flares up and protects the neck on that side.

Helmet – none.

Armour – padded arm-guard on the non-trident-carrying arm.

Usual opponent – *secutor*.



TOP The metal shield of a hoplomachus deflects an opposing Samnite's thrust over his shoulder, and he prepares a counter-strike.

ABOVE During a break from the action, a retiarius holds what appears to be a rolled-up net in his hands.

Eques 'The horseman'

Weapon – lance and short sword.

Shield – *parma equestris*, the small cavalry shield.

Helmet – old-style brimmed cavalry type.

Armour – padding on right arm.

Usual opponent – because they start the combat on horseback, *equites* only fight their own kind. However, after the initial horsing around, the *equites* generally dismount and finish their business on foot.



After sparring on horseback, two *equites* dismount and finish the combat on foot.

Speciality fighters

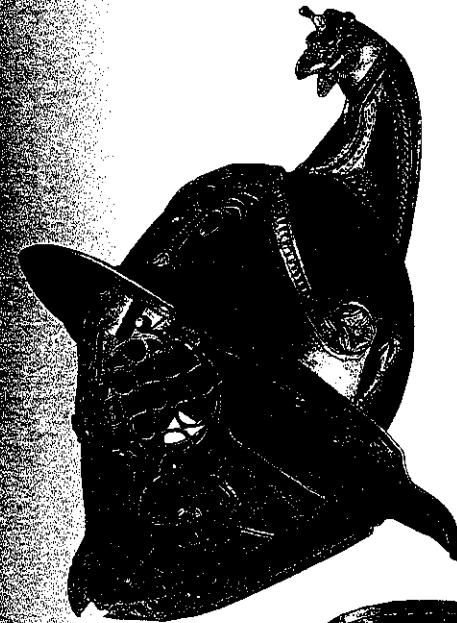
The *editores* who present the games are always on the lookout for novelty. There are also advantages in being an unusual class of fighter, because while such gladiators are experienced in facing the regular arena types, the regulars don't know what they are up against. Some of the most common uncommon types are:

Andabata The *andabatae* have helmets without eyeholes, so that they fight without being able to see their opponent. For obvious reasons they only fight other *andabatae*. hilariously lethal, if that's your idea of fun.

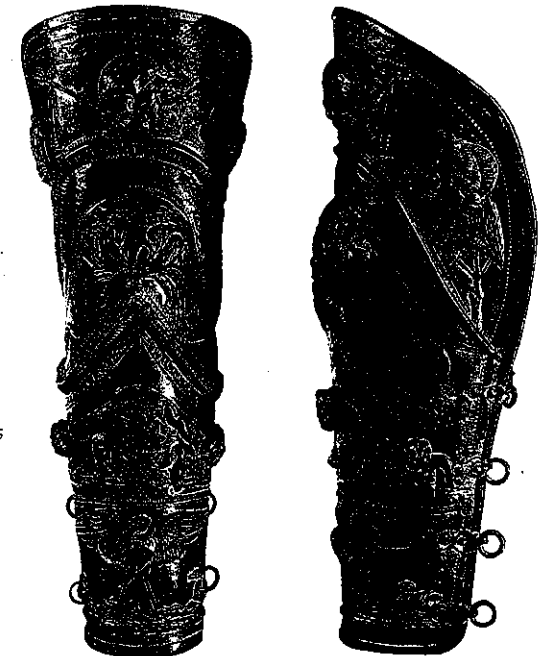
Dimachaerus A fighter with two swords and no shield. For those who believe that attack is the best form of defence.

Essedarius A chariot fighter in the old Celtic tradition. Popular a hundred years ago, but now rare.

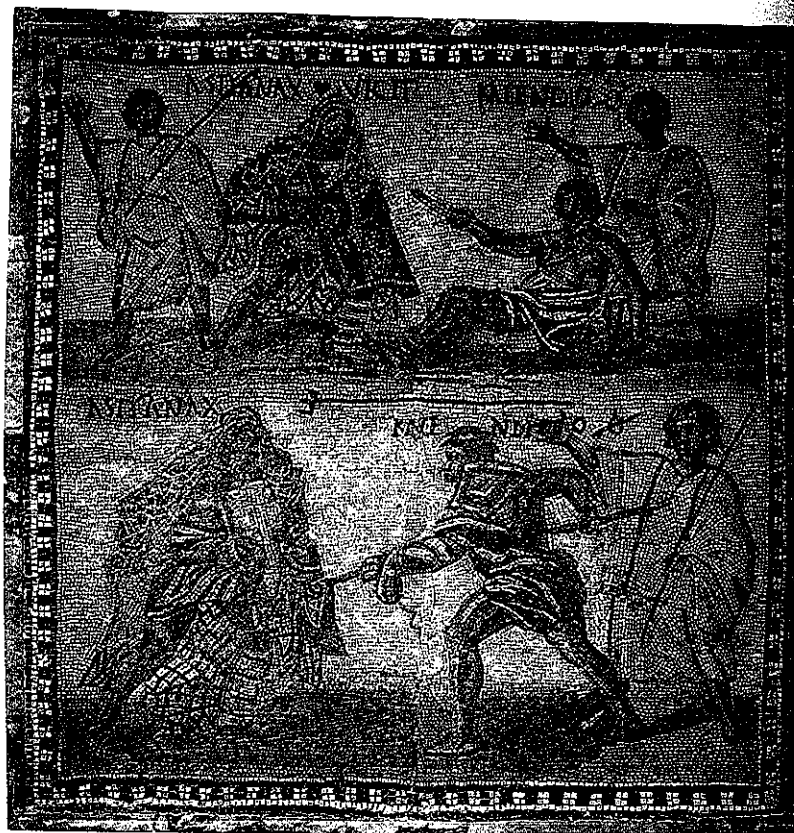
Laquearius Basically a *retiarius* with a lasso. The type is very rare and will probably never really catch on.



Helmet of a Thracian gladiator. These helmets are often topped with an ornamental griffin crest, for griffins draw the chariot of Nemesis. In practical terms, the griffin means that a Thracian must duck further and faster to completely avoid a blow.



'Parade armour'. These showy greaves (leg-warmers for gladiators) depict a gladiatorial dilemma – should one go with sensible armour that allows one to fight better, or slightly impractical kit that will impress the audience?



ABOVE *Astanax the secutor v. Kalendio the retiarius. This mosaic shows that Kalendio successfully cast his net over the secutor, but even so he could not stop Astanax from making his kill.*

OPPOSITE *Death in the arena. This 1st-century BC bas-relief shows a gladiator being finished off by his opponent. Since then, gladiator equipment has become more elaborate, and the fighters are now armoured against minor wounds.*

